

Decline and Growth of Cultures : A Philosophical Perspective



Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Change is an acknowledged fact associated with the history of cultural processes. These changes have been seen as growth and decline by various philosophers of culture and history. The paper seeks to delineate issues pertaining to cultural growth and decline. It seeks to discuss the linear progress views of Hegel, Marx and Comte; perspectives of Danilevsky, Spengler and Berdyaev, who subscribe to the inevitability of decline; the view of Toynbee that it is possible to revive the declining culture; and the perspective of Kroeber, who finds no evidence to suggest cyclic, regular or necessary change.

Humans are finite beings and can choose, pursue and master only some of the alternatives available to them at any given point of time. This finitude of human existence is reflected in limitations of our cognitive and practical skills as well as in embodiments, articulations and objectifications of these skills. It is always possible for the present generations to add upon the experiences of previous generations. In a complex and criss-cross network of cultural phenomena these additions do not get articulated univocally, rather they find expression in divergent ways in different spheres. Some spheres may get modified in a positive way and change in a manner that can be interpreted as growth. Whereas some others may change in a way which is not that good and sometimes may even be interpreted as decline. It has been debated by the thinkers as to how a culture changes with the passage of time, and whether there are discernible phases of growth and decline, or not. Do all the cultures pass through a similar sequence or not. It has also been debated as to what governs or influences the succession of these phases. Some thinkers hold the cultural and historical processes to be following the path of linear growth. There are others who contend that a culture grows, but after realising its potential, it is bound to decline. There are still others who do not subscribe to inevitability of either growth or decline, but treat the issue of future to be an open question. We propose to discuss all these viewpoints as they contain significant insights for the issues pertaining to the human destiny

Linear Progress View

Thinkers holding this view consider cultures to be passing through a series of stages, each successive stage being better than the previous one. Humanity is considered to be marching forward on the path of progress -towards a better future-through the stages of linear growth. The progress view of cultural and historical processes has found expression in the writings of Hegel, Marx and Comte.

Hegel considers reality to be a sentient and developing process. For him being and reason are identical as he insists, *the rational is real and real is rational* (1942, 224). The same process that is present in reason is considered to be at work everywhere, and hence same logic is conceived in nature as well as in society and history. Nature and society are considered to be embodiments of the rational order of *Geist* (spirit) or the *Absolute*. The goal towards which developing *Absolute* moves is self-consciousness. The meaning of the whole process is considered to lie in its highest development, i.e. in realization of the mind that *not only* knows the meaning and purpose of the universe, *but also* identifies itself with that purpose. History represents the stages of reason growing in the march towards the self-awareness of the spirit. He considers it to be the progressive approximation of the absolute realisation of freedom which is self-awareness of the spirit.

Hegel considers universal reason to be expressing itself *not only* in nature and individuals, *but also* in history and social institutions. The reason that is expressed in institutions and cultures is considered to be the same that tries to understand them. Cul-

tures are seen as moments in the passage of spirit towards critical self-awareness. He surveys history in order to decipher the immanent plan of reason that lies concealed under it, and also to see how rational is being progressively realised in the processes of cultures and civilisations. According to him China comes at very beginning of the advancement, India and Greece represent the intermediary stages. He found the perfect realisation of the absolute reason in cultures of the West (1956, 75-82).

Against Hegel's Claim that embodied reason already exists in the world, Marx contends that reason could and should exist within the world. Marx argued that Hegel's philosophy commits many mistakes as it incorporates the illusion that reality as a whole is expression of an idea -i.e. of absolute rational order governing the reality. Against this, Marx contends that it is man -not the idea- who is true subject. He considers human beings to be realising themselves -through struggle for freedom- in successive stages of progress.

Marx insists that free conscious activity is man's species character. It is because of it that man is species-being. He claimed that species-being of man consists in labour, which is defined as goal oriented free activity. He further insists that man is alienated from his true being to the extent that labour is performed under dictates of the market. It is only when labour will recover its true free character that humans will realise themselves as true creators of history (1977, 70-77). Marx presented the philosophy of history as human progress through the stages of slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism to the phase of communism. At each stage, the form taken by society is considered to be influenced by its attained level of production and requirement for its increase. In pre-socialist societies this results in the division of society into antagonistic groups of exploiting and exploited classes. Marx insists that history through stages is marching towards progress in society. It is moving towards realisation of more and more freedom aiming ultimately at an exploitation free classless society. He considers such transition to classless society to be *inevitable* as increasing socialised character of productive forces will conflict more and more with the private ownership of means of production. Thus the transition to collective ownership will be natural and inevitable. According to this view of history society moves through the stages to an exploitation free classless society in which humans will realise freedom and their true character as creators of history.

It can be seen that in the views of Hegel and Marx there are stages of human progress having implications for phases of culture. Comte's theory of cultural phases is considered an attempt that aims directly at the study of culture. In *The Positive Philosophy* he discussed stages of culture and categorised various phases of progress of any culture in terms of three stages : theological, metaphysical and scientific.

The first stage, i.e. the *theological*, is considered primarily of superstitious nature. Society at this stage of cultural development is considered to be lacking logical thinking. Unusual and unexplained events of nature and society push humans towards interpretations which are of superstitious nature. Primitive cul-

tures unable to discover causes of various natural events attribute them to forces which are of imaginary nature.

The *metaphysical* stage is considered to mark the second phase of progress of a culture. Thinking at this stage is considered to be of speculative nature. Each successive stage is considered to be an improvement upon the earlier one. With gradual progress of cultures the problems posed by them also became more complex and intricate. In order to resolve such problems metaphysical enquiries with their speculative method were instituted, which was an improvement over the *superstitious* theological stage.

After *theological* and *metaphysical* stage, comes the positive *scientific* stage of culture. From a scientific perspective metaphysical enquiries with their speculative methods were not considered much better than earlier superstitions. Speculation was considered to be a futile attempt of reason to deal with matters of fact, which could never result in knowledge, but only in conjectures and guesswork indicating a person's opinions, preferences and choices. Cultures at scientific stage accept only that as knowledge, which fulfills the conditions of public verifiability. August comte opines that all cultures reach the scientific stage after passing through theological and metaphysical stages.

It can be seen that linear progress view seeks to subsume the process of growth of cultures under some master plan. But empirical evidence does not support the view that there are universal stages in historical processes of the world. Though empirical evidence does not show same phases in all the cultures, but it does not deny that broadly speaking there are phases of growth and decline in almost all the cultures. Against linear progress view it has been pointed out by various thinkers that there are phases of decline in cultures as well. About actual cycle of phases the opinion of thinkers vary. Let us now discuss the view that cultures grow, but having realised their potential, are bound to decline.

Funeral Priests on Inevitability of Decline

Critics of linear perspective of cultural and historical processes contend that somewhere at the backdrop of unilinear progress thesis is the lurking assumption that West represents the best in the history of humankind and therefore is given a privileged position in their scheme of things. They call for replacing this biased view with a perspective which -rather than being West centric- gives due importance to all the cultures. Thinkers like Danilevsky, Spengler, Berdyaev, Toynbee, Kroeber and Sorokin point out that all cultures have their own phases of growth and decline. Of these, Danilevsky, Spengler and Berdyaev hold that all cultures blossom and grow, but having realised their potential they are bound to decline. Since they insist that cultures necessarily decline and pass away without being continued in their specific form, they have been termed *funeral priests*.

Danilevsky not only criticized the view propounding linear movement of cultures along similar lines throughout the spread of space and time, but proposed an illuminating alternative as well. He points out that strictly speaking Rome, Greece, India, Egypt and all other historical cultures have their own periods and phases of development, and number of these phases is not necessarily same. There is not one but several historico-cultural types, each perfect in its own way and all manifesting the rich creative genius of humankind. Only within the life-history of these types one can talk of phases of growth or decline. Thus history of cultures is not taken to be a linear movement following one trend or direction that articulates one kind of cultural achievements only. It infact is taken to be consisting of multidirectional movements that develop along various lines, articulating diverse aspects and values through various historico-cultural types. Each type emerges with its own form and develops its own values, thereby enriching the treasure of human cultural attainments. Having done so, it passes away without being continued in its specific and essential form.

Danilevsky discusses the reasons for disintegration and decline of historico-cultural types. According to him the main reason

for their decline is that none of them is encyclopedic as each great historico-cultural type develops and realizes only one or at the most a few of the great creative values. According to him Greek historico-cultural type realized beauty to an extent that is not rivalled by any other civilization. European type realized science; the Semitic realized religion; Roman excelled in law and political organization; Chinese in practically useful; and Indian in imagination and fantasy together with mysticism (1869, 21-28). Since the unfolding of any single value has its limits, when that limit is reached, the historico-cultural type achieves its task and dies. The stage of decline is considered to come after the period of blossoming. According to Danilevsky the time of decay of a historico-cultural type already sets in when it blooms to its zenith. The decline is not considered to be caused by some external factors, rather it is due to the inner logic of the type as it realises its potential -in the direction being pursued by it- to the fullest. And after contributing the full blown attainment of the value towards the unfolding of the many sided manifestation of creative human spirit, it extinguishes.

The emergence, growth and ageing of cultures has been studied more rigorously by Oswald Spengler, who insists on the inevitability of death and a sort of determinism in the realm of culture. Spengler, like Danilevsky, does not agree with the division of history into ancient, medieval and modern periods from the western perspective. He considers it to be a sort of Ptolemaic system of history with a focus on West and sought to replace it with a *Copernican* perspective that admits no privileged position to West as against the cultures of India, Babylon, Mexico, China, Egypt, etc. He considers each of these cultures as well as western culture to be of equal importance to the scheme of human history. Against the empty figment of one linear history, Spengler insists on the drama of a number of mighty cultures. According to him each culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay and never return. He holds that cultures unfold and grow with a superb aimlessness just as flowers unfold and grow, and human history is a picture of endless formations and transformations of these cultures as organic forms. Instead of seeing some grand design in the entire human history he considers cultures to be like organisms and world history to be their collective biography. To explain the processes of growth and decline of cultures, he uses the analogy of growth and decay of an organism. Like organisms cultures too are considered to have a specific period of life during which they actualise their possibilities and finally die. From the debris of a dead culture, another culture may spring which in turn runs through a similar course of development towards its decline and death.

Culture for Spengler, refers both to its potentialities and the sensible forms that embody those potentialities. It is described as a soul that sets out in the course of its life to actualise its inherent potentialities in certain sensible forms. The history of a culture is considered to be the progressive actualising of its possible and fulfillment is considered to be equivalent to its end. Thus the actual aspects of a culture are seen as constituting the body of the culture whereas the potentialities are considered to be its soul. He insists that a culture is born in the moment when a great soul awakens out of the proto-spirituality of ever-childish humanity. It blooms on the soil of an exactly definable landscape, to which plant wise it remains bound. It dies when this soul has actualised the full sum of its possibilities in the shape of people, languages, dogmas, arts, states, sciences, and reverts into the proto-soul. The aim once attained -the idea, the entire content of inner possibilities, fulfilled and made externally actual- the culture suddenly hardens, it mortifies, its blood congeals, its force breaks down, and it becomes civilization (1961, 90).

Thus, a culture evolves itself from initial stage of existence to the full blossoming which is highest peak of its development. From spring time it gradually starts decaying until it becomes crude and then it dies. In its earlier period it is fumbling to express itself. It is later that it discovers its language and fulfills its latent potentialities. It runs a course of development towards its decline, and ultimately death. Spengler insists that, every culture passes through the age-phases of the individual man, each has its childhood, youth,

manhood and old age. In childhood it is a young and trembling soul laden with misgivings. As it approaches its manhood through youth it becomes more and more clear. Every individual trait at this stage is marvelous in its ease and self-confidence. Finally when the fire in culture's soul dies down, it enters the last phase - the phase of civilization. Spengler considers civilization to be the inevitable destiny of every culture. The most external and artificial state that a culture *becomes* is civilization. It is thing become succeeding the thing becoming, death following life, rigidity following expansion. "They are an end, irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again (1961, 90).

For Spengler the end of cultural cycle brings decrepitude, exactitude, rigidity and technique which are associated with its degradation into civilization. Civilization expresses universality whereas culture expresses exclusiveness. In such periods growth of objectivity and distrust of feeling is almost inevitable. With the decay of culture follows the rule of mediocrity in civilization. In civilisation spirit is crushed by body, virtue loses itself in money, and religion in propaganda. In culture all the struggles are actualisation of an idea into a living historical fact. But in the stage of civilization all that remains is struggle for more power, which is for a sort of animal advantage. Spengler insists that a civilization can last for hundreds and thousands of years in such a petrified state but finally it loses its desire to be.

The dynamics of the process of decline have been delineated with intellectual rigour in *The Meaning of History* by Berdyaev. His views about culture and the processes associated with it revolve around the role and status of values in it. He contends that culture is not realisation of new life or new way of existence, rather it is realisation of new values. All achievements of a culture are in a way symbolic. In its creative phase culture creates not for utilitarian ends, but for the sake of values themselves: It pursues truth for the sake of truth or cognition; beauty for the sake of beauty; and goodness for the sake of goodness. Much practical utility is not attached to all these. However, after creating values, a culture changes its direction and passes into what Spengler has termed as civilization. The values that have been created are bound to enter real life, since values that have been apprehended can only be realised in real life. They bring about a change in real life and in a way culture itself is changed. Now it moves towards the actual realisation of its potentials by organising life in a practical manner. As a result life ceases to be experienced as a mere blossoming of fine arts and science; a deepening and refinement of thought; the flares of artistic creativity; and a contemplation of kingdom of God. All these do not inspire humans any more as the highest goal of life. Against this there grows an intense will to live; to enjoy life; to master, transform and improve everyday mundane life. The lust for *real* life ultimately results in undermining the creative genius of a culture as cultural blossoming demands an unselfish and a sort of ascetic transcendence of the real mundane life. When greed for animal and lower pleasures develop in people, the cultural creativity no more remains supreme end of life. As a result cultural creativity ceases to be supreme value and becomes mere means for practical improvement of life. With this degradation of culture and creativity to means for practical ends, the will for disinterested creativeness is weakened and ultimately it dies. Hence culture can no more stay at its lofty heights and is bound to slide down. The quality is sought to be replaced by quantity and culture turns into an uncreative civilisation. This, according to Berdyaev, explains why cultural blossoming occurs during the periods when real life is rather challenging than being easy. He considers culture to be unselfish and disinterested in its achievements whereas civilisation is always interested and utilitarian. In this way creative cultures decline into uncreative civilisations. the creative power of cultures ultimately declines and all great cultures eventually disintegrate as unities.

Toynbee more or less agrees with these thinkers on the analysis of cultures that have already died, but differs on the question of inevitability of the death of every culture. He contends that there is a chance of revival in case of cultures that are still struggling. His approach is more closer to the approach of a healer, therefore we propose to discuss his views on phases of cultures

as well as on cultural healing in the next section.

Cultural Healer's Perspective

Arnold Toynbee not only sought to rebut the iron law of culture's development to decline and death, but also explored the possibilities of chances of revival of struggling cultures. He tends to differ with Spengler that all cultures are inevitably moving towards death. As Prof. Goel puts it rather elegantly, "Toynbee wants to be a cultural healer; whereas Spengler is satisfied to remain a potential funeral priest" (1967, 145).

Toynbee insists that societies emerge as higher cultures or civilizations as a result of combination of two factors : (a) presence of a creative minority in that society, and (b) an environment that is neither too unfavourable nor too favourable. Society emerges as a civilization through the mechanism of interplay of challenge and response. The environment of the society incessantly challenges it, and the society through its creative minority responds to the challenge in a successful manner. A new challenge follows, which again is responded creatively, and the process continues and brings the society to the level of civilization.

Toynbee seeks to dispel the notions that cultural growth is either due to geographical expansion of a society, or due to technological progress leading to society's increasing mastery over physical environment. He insists that, if anything, geographical expansion is associated with retardation and disintegration, not with growth. Similarly he differentiates between real culture and manual organisation of the technique. He contends that empirical evidence does not show that growth of culture is associated with growth of technique. As against this he considers it to be associated more with simplification of civilization's apparatus and technique. He points out that cultural enrichment involves not only simplification of apparatus but a consequent transfer of energy or shift of emphasis from some lower sphere of being or sphere of action to a higher sphere. Instead of calling this a process of simplification he prefers to call it *etherealisation* (1947, 183). *Etherealisation* refers in a way to the tendency of a growing culture to withdraw itself from the life of mere physicality and concentrate more on human element. Thus growth is an incessant creative withdrawal and return of creative minority of society in the process of responding to ever new challenges posed to it. These creative pioneers rally around themselves a group of people who diffuse their ideas. Growing civilization is a unity and hence the creative minority is freely imitated and followed by the majority. A growing civilization unfolds its dominant potentialities. These dominant potentialities are different in various civilizations. He points out that these potentialities were aesthetic in Hellenic civilisation, religious in the Indic and Hindu, scientific and mechanistic in Western, etc. The process of growth represents a progressive integration and self-determination of the growing civilisation.

Whereas in the phase of growth a civilisation responds successfully to new challenges, in declining stage it fails to do so. It tries to answer it recurrently but fails. Such a situation arises when creative minority degenerates into mere dominant minority that tends to retain position by force which it ceases to hold by merit. This qualitative change in the character of ruling minority provokes a reaction from the majority which ceases to admire the minority in a spontaneous manner any more. Hence they do not imitate the ruling minority freely as they are reduced to the status of an unwilling underdog. Toynbee divides the declining phase into three sub phases of breakdown, disintegration and dissolution. These phases may be separated by centuries and sometimes even millennium. During the period between breakdown and dissolution it exists in a petrified state and like a petrified tree trunk, such a society can linger for centuries and millenniums.

It can be seen that Toynbee agrees in a way with Spengler so far as the analysis of cultures that have died is concerned. But he tends to differ on issue of future of those civilisations that are still struggling but are not dead as yet. He insists on possibility of chance of revival in such cases as they may respond success-

fully to the challenges being faced, and rise to a higher level. This is the sort of position that he takes with respect to the western civilisation, which he contends is civilisation on trial. He doesn't lose hope for it and considers the issue of its future to be an open question. In an illuminating passage on role of history, he asks, "Does history give us any information about our own prospects?... Does it spell out for us an inexorable doom, which we can merely await with folded hands -resigning ourselves, as best we may, to a fate that we cannot avert or even modify by our own efforts? or does it inform us, not of certainties, but of probabilities, or bare possibilities in our future?" (1948, 29-30). He chooses the second alternative and insists that instead of stunning us into passivity it rouses us to action. He points out that in accordance with the second alternative, the lesson of history would not be like an astrologer's horoscope, rather it would be like navigator's chart that helps the navigator to use it with intelligence and avoid shipwreck as it provides him with means of steering a course between charted rocks and reefs.

The insights provided by this delineation of various perspectives pertaining to the issues related to growth and decline of cultures can be immense help not only for making sense of contemporary cultural reality, but also for a better understanding of issues related to the direction of human destiny.

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